

COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION BELLS

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Because we write and publish books about the World's Columbian Exposition, we are always hunting for new information in old bookstores. One of our interesting and lucky discoveries was an 1894 issue of *The Granite Monthly* containing an eleven page history of the First Congregational Church in Nashua, New Hampshire. What intrigued us was a sentence describing their new church with its commanding 118 foot tall bell tower which was built in 1893 at the corner of Concord and Lowell. A parishioner had donated \$5000 for inclusion of a set of award-winning bells exhibited at the Columbian Exposition. We wondered what happened to those bells and the church.

A telephone call to the accommodating librarians at the Nashua Public Library gave us the wonderful news that the church was still there, right across the street, and the bells were the pride of Nashua! We obtained information on First Church of Nashua from Sandy Linton, church secretary, who sent *The First Church Tricentennial*, published in 1985, which details the Columbian chimes on page 40.¹ In addition, church historian and property manager, George Borski, sent a copy of the Vanduzen Company's foundry ledger showing the sale of the bells to First Church. Vanduzen of Cincinnati had exhibited a 10-bell chime in the tower of Machinery Hall at the fair. It was rung morning, noon, and night and on special occasions and received favorable reviews. Vanduzen agreed to the Nashua sale in July of 1893, according to church records, and after the fair closed in October, the bells were temporarily returned to Cincinnati where five more bells were cast by the Tift Company to make a pitch range of 1½ octaves. Installed in the new tower, the bells were dedicated to Mary Park Nutt on June 28, 1894, some five weeks after inauguration of the church. The largest bell weighs 5600 pounds and the smallest, 300.

We arranged with the church office for a visit in August 1999. As we drove into the heart of old Nashua, which has preserved much of its history, past the Historical Society and Civil War Monument, we were delighted to recognize First Church and its grand bell tower looking just like its 1894 photograph. Mr. Borski was waiting to take us on a tour of the church, which retains many elements from 1893. Next came the long climb on a series of steep wooden ladders inside the tower up to and through a small copper-clad trap door at the base of the stout oak frame holding the bells. Ducking carefully to avoid hitting the closely packed bells and wire pull mechanisms, we could see all of Nashua laid out below us. The breeze was refreshing! Borski explained how the tower and bells need constant care due to the weather; the bells and tower were serviced and their rededica-



First Church, Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1894



First Church Bell Tower, 1999



First Church Corner Stone

tion took place in September 1998. Peering at the bells, we could see that the original Vanduzen Columbian bells had embossed dates cast-in of 1893, and the five Tift bells, 1894. The bells, looking nearly new, have taken on a faint gray-green patina over the past century. The bells themselves have not been refinished, but the original wood frame was strengthened with massive new steel I-beam supports and the bell wires, pulleys, and striker mechanisms were upgraded with new components. An elaborate soldered copper sheet drain system on the bell deck keeps rainwater from collecting on the tower floor. Except for a thin wire mesh, the tower is open to the elements.

Back down below, we traced the elaborate maze of new bell wires to the original mahogany and brass clavier in a small room near ground level. Fifteen plow handles are used to ring the chimes on Sundays and special events. A microphone in the tower allows the chime operator to hear the music as it peals across the city and the Merrimack River valley.

Clearly the church is proud of saving its heritage, including the 1893 Columbian Exposition bells. We are glad they did.



Two of the Smaller Vanduzen Columbian Bells With Pulls



The Original Vanduzen & Tift Co. Brass Plaque



The Vanduzen Clavier and George Borski